

Summary

Meeting dates: October 16, 2014 Commission Conference Call

Agenda item: Petition to Open fishing for bottomfish in Northern Hood Canal and Dabob Bay

Presenter(s): Craig Burley, Fish Management Division Manager

Background summary: The Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) has received a petition to Open fishing for bottomfish in the Northern Hood Canal region and Dabob Bay.

The petition states:

“It is very evident without extensive research that fish populations in this requested area are better than other Puget Sound areas. Thus there should be no reasons not to open fishing for these fish to at least the levels allowed in other Puget Sound areas.”

WAC 220-56-230 closes recreational fishing year-round for bottomfish and halibut in Marine Area 12 (Hood Canal).

Policy issue(s) you are bringing to the Commission for consideration:

Pursuant to RCW 34.05.330 should the Commission:

- a) Deny the petition in writing, stating the reasons for the denial, specifically addressing the concerns raised by the petitioner, and where appropriate, the alternative means by which it will address the concerns raised by the petitioner; or
 - b) Initiate rule-making proceedings.
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Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) has received this petition requesting amendments to recreational fishing rules to allow fishing for bottomfish in the Northern Hood Canal.

Action requested:

Department staff requests that the Commission deny the petition and initiate rulemaking to consider allowing bottomfish fishing for selected species in waters shallower than 120 feet in Quilcene Bay and Dabob Bay north of a true east line from Point Whitney to the Toandos Peninsula.

Draft motion language:

I move to Deny the petition to open fishing for bottomfish in the Northern Hood Canal region and Dabob Bay and direct staff to initiate rulemaking to consider allowing bottomfish fishing for selected species in waters shallower than 120 feet in Quilcene Bay and Dabob Bay north of a true east line from Point Whitney to the Toandos Peninsula.

Justification for Commission action:

The entrance to Hood Canal is shallow (150') and then the canal deepens to about 600'. This sill at the entrance restricts the flow of water in and out of the canal. Freshwater inflow from rivers coupled with poor water exchange can result in a highly stratified water column. These conditions together with the addition of nutrients into the canal from upland sources results in persistent low dissolved oxygen conditions in a substantial portion of the Canal.

In 2002, 2003 and 2004 low dissolved oxygen caused large fish and shellfish kills in Hood Canal. The Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted permanent fishing regulations in August

2004 to close commercial and recreational fisheries to eliminate harvest mortality and provide additional protection from mortality and stress created by low dissolved oxygen conditions. Since the fishing closure has been in place additional low dissolved oxygen events have occurred in 2006 and 2010 resulting in large fish and shellfish kills.

Scientific trawl data show that fish densities in the northern and southern portions of Hood Canal exhibit similar low densities (Figure 1) indicating that northern Hood Canal may be providing a refuge for bottomfish that may move to the north as a temporary response to an acute stressor. The northern canal may also provide a source of bottomfish to repopulate southern Hood Canal after low dissolved oxygen events. The trawl data also show that fish densities in the canal are chronically low (compared to densities in the 1960s) and are comparable to current densities elsewhere in Puget Sound, with the possible exception of English sole (Figure 2). Having been closed to bottomfish harvest for a decade, the expectation is that Hood Canal populations of bottomfish species should exhibit increased densities as a result of decreased harvest mortality.

Given the status of the bottomfish resources in Hood Canal, Department staff believe there is an opportunity to provide recreational fisheries for selected bottomfish species in Quilcene Bay and the northern portion of Dabob Bay while continuing to provide conservation measures to address low dissolved oxygen conditions in Hood Canal (Figure 3).

Communications Plan: N/A

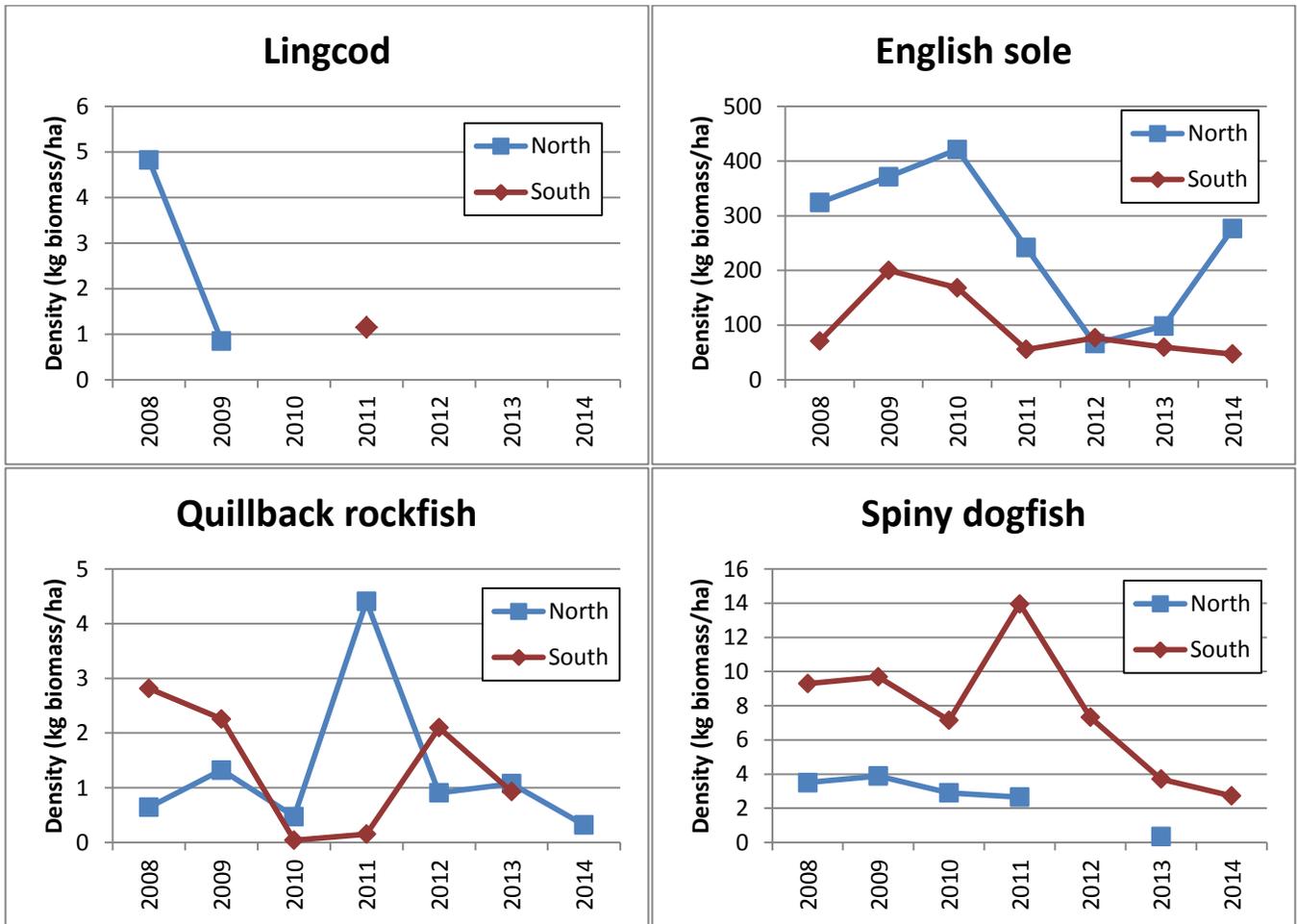


Figure 1. Densities of select bottomfish species in Hood Canal. Estimates are from trawl surveys and apply to the entire subtidal area North and South of a break point approximately midway along the Canal, specifically Pleasant Harbor. Begin with the 2008 trawl survey season sampling was equally north and south of this separation point.

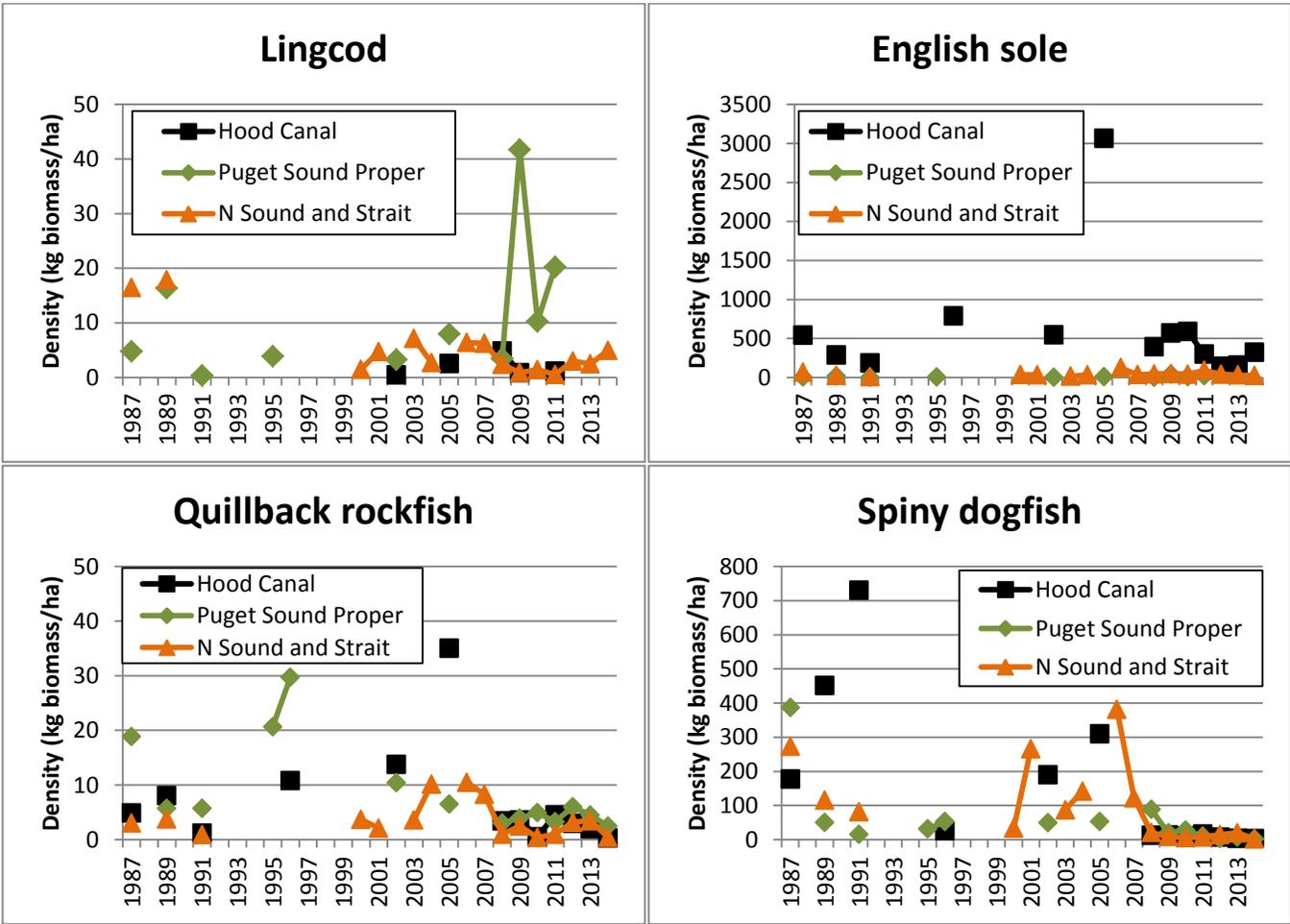


Figure 2. Densities of select bottomfish species in Hood Canal, Puget Sound proper (all areas south of Port Townsend), and the North Sound (San Juan Islands and the Strait of Juan de Fuca). Estimates are from trawl surveys and apply to the entire subtidal area within these designated regions. Prior to 2008 survey coverage was episodic but has been consistent since.

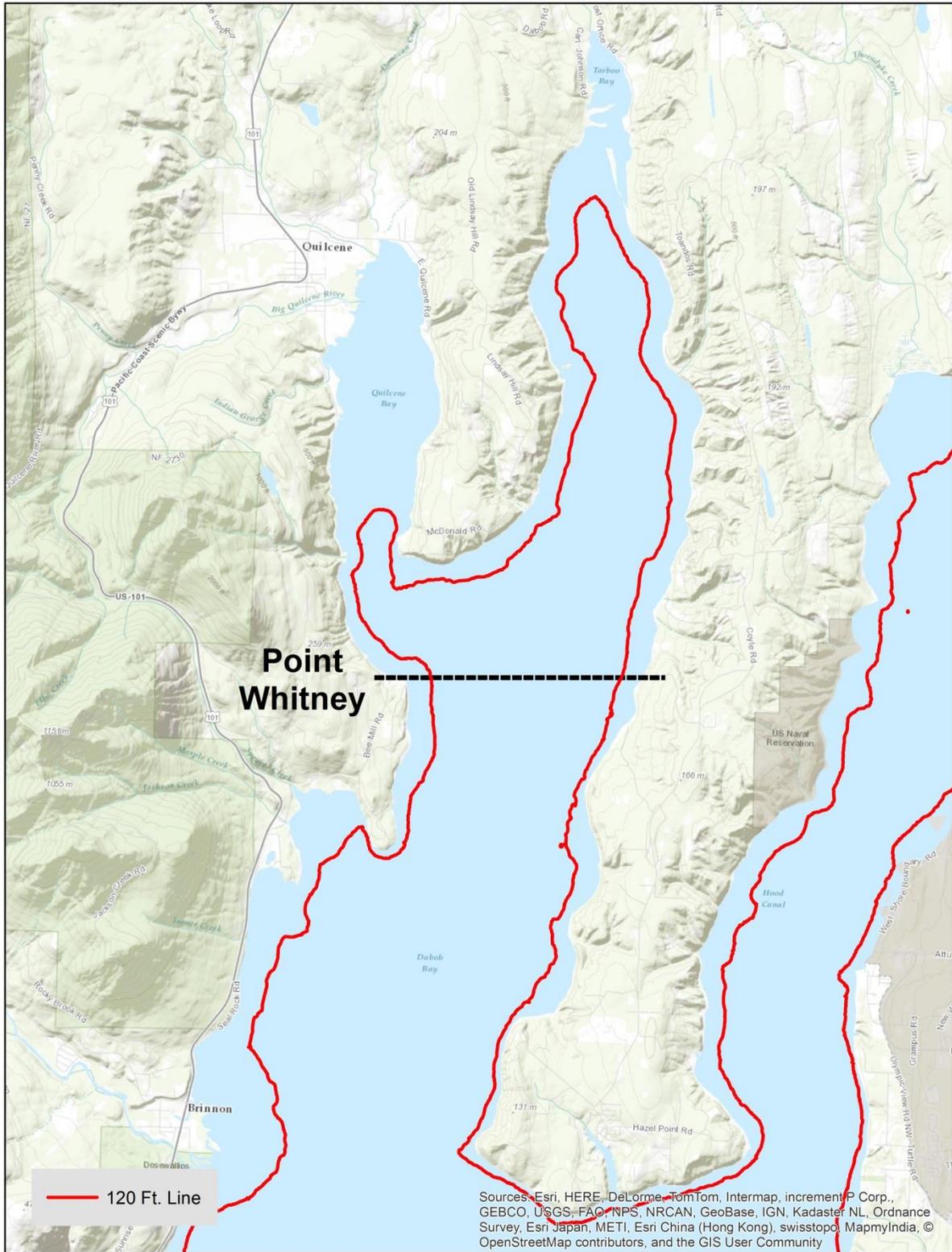


Figure 3. Quilcene and Dabob Bays with 120 ft. depth contour in red and proposed southern boundary line (dashed line).